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EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE, Tuesday, May 2, 10:30 a.m. (ET)

YMCA SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS TEEN-PARENT COMMUNICATION GAP
Teens still rely on parents, despite limited quality time

WASHINGTON, May 2— A new poll released today contains troubling news about the quality of communication between American parents and their young teenage children. The poll, released by the YMCA of the USA at a White House Conference on teenagers, concludes that the vast majority of teens still turn to their parents in times of trouble. But it also reveals that parents and teens have differing views on the ways they interact and even on the topics of their conversations.

The survey polled teenagers aged 12 to 15 and parents. Among its findings are that many families do not eat meals together and that parents significantly underestimate the time their teens spend in front of the television or computer. The poll also shows that young people list inadequate family time as one of their greatest concerns.

In the area of communication, the poll makes clear that, while many parents believe they are discussing issues like sex, violence, and drug and alcohol abuse with their children, their children have a different perception. For example, 61 percent of parents say they talk frequently to their children about values and beliefs, but only 41 percent of children report such conversations. A greater percentage of parents than teenagers also reports having conversations about sex, violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. The communication disconnect also exists over whether parents and their teens share the same values and beliefs, with 62 percent of parents saying they do, compared with 46 percent of children.

“The good news is that families are still spending time together,” says Kenneth L. Gladish, Ph.D., national executive director, YMCA of the USA. “The bad news is that children may not be hearing what we parents *think* we’re saying. Our kids deserve our best efforts, and we must not fail them.”

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YMCA mission: To put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all.

Gladish made his remarks at the White House during the day-long *White House Conference on Teenagers: Raising Responsible and Resourceful Youth*. The conference was co-sponsored by the YMCA of the USA, a major national child and family advocacy group.

While families share an average of 80 minutes together each day, young teenagers expressed a desire for more time with their parents. A quarter of all parents report eating no more than four meals a week with their teens.

Education and family time are the top teenage concerns, according to the poll. By contrast, the poll found, parents worry most about drug and alcohol abuse.

Parents also seem to have different notions of the way their teenage children spend their time. Nearly half of all teenagers said they spend their free time with friends, while only about one quarter of parents believe that to be the case. Among the poll's most striking findings is that 71 percent of parents say they frequently monitor their children's Internet use, while only 24 percent of teenagers say their parents supervise them.

Talking with Teens: the YMCA Parent and Teen Survey was performed by the Global Strategy Group, Inc. of New York and Washington, which conducted 200 random telephone interviews with children and 200 with parents during the period April 11-20. The margin of error is +/- 6.9%.

The YMCA of the USA is the national resource office for the 2,393 independent YMCA associations in the United States. Collectively, America's YMCAs are the nation's largest provider of child care. YMCAs across the country are at the heart of community life and offer a variety of programs such as family activity nights, juvenile delinquency prevention programs, volunteerism and mentoring, and welfare-to-work initiatives. YMCAs serve nearly 17 million people, including 9 million children during non-school hours.

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Talking With Teens: The YMCA Parent and Teen Survey Final Report

I. Key Findings

- **The good news is that most teens (78%) turn to their parents in times of need.**
 - Boys are more likely than girls to say they turn to their parents for advice (84% vs. 72%).
 - Reliance on parental advice increases from 67% to 90% between the ages of 12 and 13, but then declines over the next two years, with 65% of 15 year olds turning to their parents for guidance (65%).
- **Another positive finding is that teens and their parents appear to be talking and spending time together. They report spending an average of about 80 minutes per day talking to one another and eating an average of eight meals a week together.**
 - Not surprisingly, younger teens report spending more time with parents than their older counterparts (89 minutes a day for 12 yr. olds vs. 69 minutes for 15 yr. olds). However, parents say they average over 80 minutes a day with all age groups.

- Children of single parents spend less time talking to their parents than those with two adults at home (on average 67 minutes vs. 81 minutes per day).
- Mothers spend significantly more time with their teens than fathers (on average 93 minutes vs. 78 minutes per day).
- **Although most families break bread together regularly, there are still a large number who cannot find the time for family meals. One in four parents (24%) and 17% of teens report eating no more than four meals a week together as a family.**
 - Disturbingly, 10% of parents report that they eat just one meal a week, or never eat, with their teens.
- **“Not having enough time together” with their parents is the *top* concern among teenagers today. Teens are three times more likely than their parents to say that “not having enough time together” is their biggest issue of concern (21%). Family time is tied with education for first place on the teens’ list of concerns.**
 - Teens of all ages are concerned by the lack of quality time with their parents.
- **Conversely, parents are far more concerned by outside threats such as drugs and alcohol (24%) than they are about family time. Quality time comes in as the fourth most important priority at 8%.**

- **A substantial percentage of parents and teenagers report that teens spend more of their free time watching television and using computers than they do interacting with their parents. Over one-third of all parents (36%) report that their teens spend the majority of their free time in front of a computer or television screen. Nearly three in ten teens (29%) agree.**
 - Parents underestimate the time their teens spend in front of the television. Only 12% of parents believe their children watch TV during the majority of their free time, while 20% of teens confess to being couch potatoes.
- **Parents often say that they frequently monitor their teen's time in front of the TV and on the Internet, but their children don't agree. While 85% of parents say they frequently monitor what their kids watch on TV (42% "all the time," 43% "often"), 61% of children say they are watching TV without any parental supervision (22% "all the time," 39% "often").**
 - Interestingly, younger teens are more likely to watch television unsupervised than their older counterparts (66%, 12 yr. olds vs. 49%, 15 yr. olds).
- **Parents are even more naïve when it comes to Internet exposure. Nearly three-quarters of parents (71%) assert that they frequently monitor their child's use of the Web. However, 45% of teens say they surf the Web "all the time/often" without a watchful parental eye.**

- **Many parents feel the time they spend with their teens is inadequate. Only 30% of parents say that they spend “more than enough time with their kids.” Another 42% are looking for more quality time with their teens (31% “have some time, but need more,” 12% “do not have nearly enough time”).**
 - Fathers have a bigger disconnect with their teenagers than mothers. Nearly half of all dads (47%) are looking to spend more time with their teens, compared to 38% of mothers who say they need more time.
 - Single parents (23%) are the most likely to maintain that they “do not have nearly enough time” available to spend with their teens.
- **Both teenagers (34%) and parents (34%) blame parental work obligations as the primary reason why families are not spending more time together.**
 - Four in ten fathers (43%) blame work for coming between them and their kids. Additionally, younger parents (37%, 25-44) are more likely than older parents (26%, 45+) to feel that their career keeps them from spending time with their teenagers.
 - Older teens (37%, 14-15) are somewhat more likely than 12 and 13 year olds (30%) to blame their parent’s work schedule for detracting from family time.
 - “Pressed parents,” who are looking to spend more time with their teens (42% of parents overall), suggest that the number one barrier to being together is work (42%). Additionally, these parents face the problem of not being in the same place as their teens at the same time (19%), and complain about a general lack of desire on the part of the kids (14%).

- **Hectic work schedules are not the only barrier families face when trying to spend time together; some teenagers say they would rather spend time with their friends than with their families. Teens are twice as likely to say prefer to spend time with their friends than parents believe (25% vs. 12%).**
 - Teenage boys are significantly more likely than girls to prefer spending time with friends instead of family (31% vs. 19%).
- **The influence of friends is a recurring theme. Teens are almost two-and-a-half times more likely than their parents to state that friends are a critical influence on their values (26% vs. 11%). And over half of all teens (51%) turn to their friends as a source of advice on life issues.**
 - The impact peers have on forming values increases steadily as teens get older. **Just 15% of 12 year olds report that friends are the biggest influence on their values, while 37% of 15 year olds say the same.** Likewise, teens become more dependent on their friend's advice as they get older. Just 37% of 12 year olds cite friends as a source of advice compared to 67% of 15 year olds.
 - Two in five teens who feel their parents do not have enough time to spend with them (40%) turn to friends for guidance on values.
 - Children of single parents are more likely than those from a two parent home to rely on their friends for advice (59% vs. 49%), as well as information concerning values (38% vs. 24%).

- **When families do spend time together, the communication is not getting through. For instance, parents may think that they talk to their children about values and beliefs on a frequent basis (64%), but teens are only hearing it 41% of the time!**
 - Parents of 14 year olds reportedly are the most likely to frequently talk to their teens about values and beliefs (68%). However, only 34% of this age group agrees that they are having conversations about values on a frequent basis.
 - Teenage girls (44%) are more likely to speak with their parents frequently about values than boys of the same age (38%).
- **Similarly, 62% of parents “strongly agree” that they share the same basic values as their teens. However, only 46% of teens suggest that this is true.**
 - Three-quarters of all mothers (75%) “strongly agree” that they share the same values with their teens, compared to just 48% of fathers.
 - Over half of all teenage girls (52%) “strongly agree” that they share the same values with their parents. Just 40% of teen boys feel the same.

- **The same disconnect between parental and teenage perception can be seen on important issues like sex, dating, drugs and alcohol, and future plans.**
 - For example, according to 43% of parents, sex is a frequent topic of conversation in their homes. However, just 26% of teens suggest their parents speak to them about sex with any regularity. Likewise, while 34% of parents suggest they discuss dating frequently, only one-quarter of teens (25%) say the same.
 - ◆ Interestingly, as teens get older, and are more likely to be sexually active, their parents talk to them less about sex. Only 22% of 12 year olds report that their parents “rarely/never” speak to them about the topic, while 58% of 15 year olds do not speak to their parents about sex.
 - ◆ Similarly, parents are more likely to report that they speak to their teens frequently about drugs and alcohol than teens state (51% vs. 35%).
 - ◆ Again, the older a teen becomes the less likely it is that parents will talk to them about the topic. Just 30% of 14 and 15 year olds report that their parents speak to them frequently about drugs and alcohol. In comparison, 41% of 12 and 13 year olds have parents who talk to them regularly on the topic.

II. Methodology

- Global Strategy Group (GSG) conducted a total of 400 telephone interviews nationwide among children between the ages of 12 and 15 (200 interviews) and parents of children between the ages of 12 and 15 (200 interviews), using experienced research interviewers.
 - Parental consent was obtained for the 200 minors who participated in the research.
- The length of the questionnaire was approximately eight minutes and included a total of 21 questions.
- Respondents were called from a nationwide sample of self-reported households with children 11 to 15 currently living at home.
 - The sample was purchased strictly for the use of this study, and the interviews were stratified by gender and age group.
- The interviews were conducted between April 11 and April 20, 2000.
- The survey has an overall margin of error of $\pm 4.9\%$ at the 95% confidence level.
- - The margin of error is $\pm 6.9\%$ among the 200 children interviews as well as the 200 parent interviews.



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In the area of communication, the poll makes clear that, while many parents believe they are discussing issues like sex, violence, and drug and alcohol abuse with their children, their children have a different perception. For example, 61 percent of parents say they talk frequently to their children about values and beliefs, but only 41 percent of children report such conversations. A greater percentage of parents than teenagers also reports having conversations about sex, violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. The communication disconnect also exists over whether parents and their teens share the same values and beliefs, with 62 percent of parents saying they do, compared with 46 percent of children.

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